

A quote attributed to Pablo Picasso reads, “Good artists copy; great artists steal.” Not for naught, but given that all the men and women we have read have in turn read the works of their predecessors, it would be foolish to claim that plagiarism was nonexistent.

Under the headline of imitation, BYU’s acclaimed *Silva Rhetoricae* claims that imitation was a practiced virtue in ancient Roman and Renaissance curricula.

“Students were instructed to use copybooks to record passages from their reading that exemplified noteworthy content or form, which they would then quote or imitate within their own speeches or compositions.” (*Silva Rhetoricae*, *imitation*)

If I might jump to the present day for a moment, these “copybooks” lie directly in correlation with Bruno Latour’s concept of notebooks. If you “keep track of all [your] moves,” as Latour would say, is there anything to stop you from imitating and, eventually, stealing the works of others?

To stay on the present, well maybe the present-past, Andy Rooney, one of the more brilliant essayists of our time, participated as thoroughly in imitation (or plagiarism) as anyone else ever has.

“The trouble with writing is that you’re always working. I hate myself for it, but I’ll be at a party and I’ll hear someone express an interesting idea, and I’ll think to myself, ‘Gee, I could use that.’” (Andy Rooney)

I seem to have promised that I would return to the ancients, or at most the renaissance. As this is History of Rhetoric II, I will skip ahead to the 19th century, but not before I drop a few proofs of the value of imitation, courtesy of Seneca the Younger.

Omnis ars naturae imitatio est. All art is but imitation of nature.

Sciant quae optima sunt esse communia. The best ideas are common property.

Cui Bono?—We all do! Lest we forget, everything we have we owe to our ancestors, regardless of who they are or what they did. Above all else, we owe our language to those who have come before us. To quote Mark Zuckerberg (Jesse Eisenberg) from “The Social Network,”

“Look, a guy who builds a nice chair doesn’t owe money to everyone who ever has built a chair, okay? They came to me with an idea, I had a better one.”

I grant you that a line exists between imitation and downright plagiarism; but, it is a very small, inconsistent line. It comes as no surprise that, in regards to rhetorical tradition, language, and areas of oratory, the white man kept women and people of color in the dark (pardon the pun). Without having a forefather or examples to learn and perhaps copy from, the ability to gain footing in rhetoric and oratory is annihilated.

Sure, in order to talk to the general public—I imagine a large portion was indeed white males—women and people of color were forced to adopt the style that was considered “in” or “hip” for their time. However, by taking the oratorical and rhetorical constructs that were already in place and applying their own façade, these unknowing men and women were able to make great strides in Western rhetorical tradition.

“You white ghost writer you!” White men were so used to having the rhetorical prowess all to themselves that the only logical explanation for the abilities of Frederick Douglass was that he had someone else write for him. What would be more horrifying to the white men of the time, a man (or woman) teaching a black man to read and write, or a man writing speeches for a black man? Nevertheless, Douglass himself admits that he has imitated—excuse me, stolen!

“All that I know I have stolen,” he told a British audience—and now he commanded the full range of Western cultural archives in the allusions, arguments, and strategies of his masterful performances.” (Frederick Douglass, pg.1063)

In several of our texts, imitation is viewed as being more deep seeded than we might care to think. On the surface, to imitate, copy, or steal from someone is a relatively easy and simply concept. You take someone, or something, as a model and create your own entity. Perhaps rhetoric is more like a tree than is apparent—*Silva Rhetoricae*, the forest of rhetoric,; coincidence? I think not! A tree grows up from the ground with a sturdy trunk. Only after it is, more or less, structurally sound can it begin to grow branches. Just like rhetoric, some branches are bigger than others and carry more responsibility—certainly the five canons of rhetoric would be among the most vital branches, or perhaps they would be trees themselves! But I digress; back to *deep seeded* imitation.

The quote of Seneca previously provided, “All art is but imitation of nature,” emulates sections of both George Campbell and Virginia Woolf to the fullest—perhaps even Hume, in the way that our perception of reality is but a mass of properties. Campbell compares the orator to the painter; in order to “win” (be considered *good*), both must imitate their subjects with grace and clarity. As

much as the painter paints a picture with his brush, so too must the orator paint a picture with his words. Woolf, on the other hand, employs imitation to the processes of her mind. For example, say you were asked to argue the validity of global warming. You might immediately think of weather and polar ice caps. But, eventually, you would bring up automobile pollution, sustainability for future generations, whatever. The point being that different persons have different ways about, in this case, persuading you to confirm or deny global warming. Opposed to forming a step by step, scientific method-like way of composing an argument or idea, Woolf follows her own method, or mind. Although she can appear confusing and convoluted at times, her method genuinely reflects (or imitates) her own nature.

Not for naught, but there is something to be said for imitation.